

# Slammed by government cuts and sidelined by the Occupy movements, women face an uphill battle to challenge patriarchy in 2012

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*Women have borne the brunt of the coalition government's cut programme, facing reduced public services and diminished employment opportunities. And while the Occupy and other protests movements have highlighted inequality in the UK, they continue to be dominated by white men. [Amanda Conroy](#) argues that feminists should take a cue from the OccupyPatriarchy movement and turn their attention toward the values underpinning male-dominated capitalism.*



A number of times over the most recent holiday season, I was asked to undertake an impossible task: to explain what it means to be a feminist today. I have a feeling I've deeply disappointed my interlocutors with my disjointed attempts to interweave thoughts about persistent gender inequality with rampant income inequality and the current crisis in global capitalism. At the time, I attempted to charmingly excuse my incoherence through reference to the difficulties of conveying complex ideas in the end-of-term holiday party environment ("Phew, the term has taken it out of me!", "Oi, this mulled wine is strong!"). But now, as we tuck 2011 safely to bed and begin to look forward to what 2012 will bring for feminism in the UK, it strikes me as necessary to do a bit of a better job; after all, if I could pick one thing to mark UK feminism in 2011, it would be a deepening dissatisfaction, not only with inequities in the ways the market distributes resources and rewards labour, but with the foundational values of capitalism itself.

Women are [disproportionately affected](#) by the £16 billion cut from the welfare budget; it is estimated that £11.5 billion of the cuts are borne by women. Tax and benefits changes hit lone parents, most of whom are women, [the hardest](#). Forced to supplement welfare benefits with paid work, lone parents are finding increasingly diminished employment opportunities, a trend which shows no signs of abating in 2012. Women's unemployment rates are the [highest in 23 years](#); 1.1 million women are out of work. Cuts to the public sector are gendered; 40 per cent of women work in the public sector against [11 per cent of men](#) and [65 per cent of public sector](#) employees are women.

Feminists have not exactly taken this lying down. Dominating feminist activism this year has been the impact of cuts to social welfare on women. Prominent feminist organizations and think-tanks [have criticised the government](#) for failing to properly consider the impact of new austerity measures on women. A march was organised by the Fawcett Society on 19 November to protest an approach to cutting the deficit that would effectively widen the gap between women and men. On 15 November, the Trades Unions Congress (TUC) released its [Women and the Cuts toolkit](#) in order to aid groups and individuals assess the impact of the cuts in their local communities.

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As the year came to a close, feminist action against the cuts dovetailed with the rise of Occupy and associated movements against income inequality, global finance and capitalism. Women and feminists in the movement, however, have become increasingly dissatisfied with the ways in which campaigns against income inequality have articulated the issues, particularly their ignorance of the gender pay gap. The most glaring example has been the incidence of rape in Occupy movements and the movement's inability (unwillingness) to [respond appropriately](#). Women have complained of difficulties in making themselves visible in a movement that, despite its profession of adherence to non-hierarchical organizing, is still dominated by white men.

In the last few weeks of 2011, however, more and more women are mobilizing around dissatisfaction, not just with the organization or public face of Occupy but the very issues that reach the table for debate. Feminists have been arguing that whiteness and masculinity are characteristics the very wealthy tend to share and that this cannot be ignored. [“When we look at the 1%”](#), says Laura Kacere, writing from the US, “we see not only a huge amount of wealth (one-fourth of the nation's income), we also see predominantly straight, white men whose economic and political power is upheld by patriarchy, white privilege, and heteronormativity.”

In 2012 Feminists need to continue to mobilize against austerity measures that disproportionately disadvantage women. But they also need to keep up the momentum from [OccupyPatriarchy](#) by starting to think about economics differently. Too much of the current efforts to fix the economy have focused on getting us back to business as usual. The weak foundations lurking at the heart of attempts to patch up the global economy are not only based on unsustainable allocations of natural resources but, as the market calls on its human components to work longer hours with less security and less public provision for individual and collective well-being, on mining human resources beyond sustainable levels. The shortfall will have to come from somewhere and, if past experience is to be a guide, the brunt of this burden will fall primarily on women.

Feminists, in the UK and elsewhere, will have to walk a fine balance in 2012. As [Philippa Willitts put it](#) in a post for the F-word, “if we are not represented in the 99%, and are not part of the 1%, then where are we, and why are we, in this movement?” Co-operation with student, anti-racist, environmental, anti-capitalist, and pro-democracy movements may result in nothing more than co-optation. But the alternative is to risk fragmenting social movements mobilized to address socio-economic problems until we are no longer able to make the necessary linkages between global socio-economic problems. Feminists need to both renegotiate the agenda of such movements and take inspiration from them in order to renegotiate their own agenda. In other words, the task of feminism – whatever that may come to mean in the coming year – is to make cacophony work. Feminists will need to find a way to be both the 49% and the 99% simultaneously.



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